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Misconceptions in American Government

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T H E S I S

MISCONCEPTIONS IN AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

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Submitted by

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(B.S. Temple University, 1938)

In partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

1948

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CHAPTER I

CHAPTER I

PURPOSE AND IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

No one would deny that the successful operation of American democracy depends on the political intelligence of its citizens. If there is little political intelligence among the people, then the success of our government will necessarily be limited. Yet, many studies have shown that each year young men and women graduate from our high schools with a pitiful lack of information about their government.[1]

The writer will be content to accept as a foregone conclusion the insufficiency of the high school senior's knowledge of American government. He will limit his effort to an attempt to discover whether or not fundamentally important misconceptions occupy a large portion of the scant information which most students have at their disposal.

A large number of textbooks has been written with the intention of supplying the student with adequate

1/ See Chapter II, pages 6 to 10.

information to fit him for intelligent participation in his government. The high schools are alleged to have a well-rounded social studies program, including a special emphasis on citizenship and government.

The question is are the young men and women leaving our high schools with misbeliefs about their government? If so, are these misunderstandings fundamentally important? What are some of the false notions? To what extent do they prevail? Can their prevalence be correlated with the extent of previous education in American government, or the quality of that education? These are some of the questions which the writer will endeavor to answer in this study.

There is no doubt that the typical high school graduate is patriotic and proud of his country. He may praise all things American, and be an abiding hater of the communist way of life; but to be an effective citizen he must know how to do his part in helping to deal with the nation's problems. In order to accomplish this, he must, above all, have an accurate working knowledge of his government. He must not be content to vote only because it is a duty, and to shy away from public office because he fears that the blackest stigma will be fastened upon him.

Intelligent, informed voting, and the aspiration for and willingness to hold public office are the two contributions that every citizen can make to the efficient working of American democracy. In spite of this, "less than fifty percent of the voters turn out even for a presidential election; local elections frequently bring out only one-fifth of the voters, and the all-important pre-primaries attract as little as 3 percent of the electorate."[2]

It is the contention of this observer that the lack of interest in voting, and the fear of holding public office are caused by two highly regrettable conditions, both of which can and must be corrected. These conditions are ignorance and misunderstanding.

Proof of ignorance of the first cardinal principles of American government is abundant. Only a very few examples of this ignorance on the part of high school seniors can be demonstrated in these pages.

Evidence of misconceptions about American government are not so readily apparent. However, teachers never fail to find large numbers of students harboring false

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2/ Ogg, Frederic A., and Ray P. Orman, Introduction to American Government, D. Appleton - Century Company, Inc., New York, 1945, p. 212.

beliefs about their government. The provocative uncertainties regarding this condition of misunderstanding have prompted this investigation.

At the 27th annual meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies in St. Louis during November 1947, Dr. John W. Studebaker, U.S. Commissioner of Education, discussed the subject, "Communism's Challenge to American Education".

"We live in epic times," the Commissioner declared. "We are participants in a dramatic clash between two opposing sets of ideas, two contrasting philosophies of life and social organization--those of democracy vs. dictatorship, of free enterprise vs. Communism, of individualism vs. collectivism."[3]

To meet the need for training students for democratic living, Dr. Studebaker urged that all students be required to take four years of work in the social studies field in grades 9 to 12. (Dorothy Meredith's study of the Social Studies curriculum in U.S. schools during 1945 revealed that only one year of social study is universally

3/ The Civic Leader, Civic Education Service, Washington, D.C., Volume XV, Number 12, December 15, 1947.

required--U.S. History in the 11th grade, that one-half of our schools require Civics, in the 9th grade, while Problems of Democracy is a required subject in two-thirds of the schools in grade 12.)[4] This is a far cry from the four years of social study work urged by the U.S. Commissioner of Education. Remember the social studies in the high school curriculum are the only courses which bear upon American government. Yet, with the sparse attention given to these subjects in the typical four-year secondary program, teachers are urged by W.C. Sawyer, Director of the American Legion's National Americanization Commission, "to combat Communist infiltration by giving students a living faith in democracy."[5]

Attorney General Thomas C. Clark urges teachers to instill in their students "a deep appreciation of that form of government which enables men to think, work, and act with freedom." "Through affirmative programs of education," the Attorney General continues, "democracy must be shown to be the best technique that man has yet devised for governing himself--not a decadent form of government, but a dynamic one that releases the energies of every single human being."[6]

4/ Meredith, Dorothy, "The Status of the Social Studies Curriculum 1945", Social Education, December, 1945, p. 545.
5/ The Civic Leader, December 15, 1947.
6/ Ibid.

Again, President Truman's Advisory Commission on Universal Training advocates a program for bringing about, "an understanding of democracy and an increased sense of personal responsibility on the part of every individual for making democracy work..."[7]

In short, leading Americans are in common agreement on the need for giving young people a clear understanding of the essential elements of the American democratic way of life. The trouble is that most schools do not give time enough so that high school students can actually sink their teeth into the all-important study of American government.

Walter Lippmann stated the crux of the problem clearly when he wrote in The Phantom Public that no one, unless he gives all of his time to it, can hope to know or understand even a small part of the facts upon which a judgment is to be recorded at the polls.[8]

Certainly, the least the high school can do is to provide the embryonic voter with the four-year Social

7/ Fitzpatrick, E.A., "A National Disservice to Education", American School Board Journal, 114:20+, February, 1947.

8/Lippmann, Walter, The Phantom Public, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1930, page 20.

Studies program urged by the U.S. Commissioner of Education. However, it will not be the purpose of this study to attack the high school curriculum in the Social Studies field, or the texts used, or the teachers who so valiantly strive to inculcate American democracy under the existing limitations of both the courses offered and the texts used.

This investigation will be an exploration into the relatively untrodden ground of misunderstanding about our government. The investigator hopes to light the way for the prosecution of further inquiry into this important field, to the end that our rising generation of new voters shall be more adequately equipped with a truthful and accurate working knowledge of their government.

CHAPTER II

CHAPTER II

THE RESULTS OF PREVIOUS INVESTIGATION

Peters traced democracy as a form of government down through the ages and shows how, "as popular control of affairs of state has increased, so also has the control of government become bafflingly complicated".[1] He pointed out the time and thought required of the voter to manage well so complex a society and proves by several illustrations that the voting citizen is failing to meet the challenge.

In 1931, Albert J. Brooks of Boston University tested the civic interests, understandings and attitudes of high school seniors to throw light upon the social studies curriculum in the high school as to its adequacy in developing an appreciation of the problems and issues of contemporary society. In general, the results of the tests indicated a lack of acquaintance with persons of note in government and politics, and a lack of knowledge of current events and problems of a civic nature.

1/ Peters, Charles C., Objectives and Procedures in Civic Education, Longmans, Green and Company, New York, 1930, p. 5.

"The results of these tests disclose a woeful need of knowledge of the present-day problems of society; a lack of capacity on the part of the pupils to think intelligently about historical relationships and civic affairs."[2]

Irving R. Melbo reported in 1934 that the pupils graduating from thirty-eight California high schools possessed accurate information on about one-third of 200 selected issues or problems, possessed no information on another third, and were actually misinformed on a third.[3]

In 1936 an authoritative commission found certain areas in the Social Studies Program to be neglected. Some major topics, not treated adequately in most schools, which would increase the direct usefulness of the social studies curriculum were found to be as follows:

1) The nature of government.

2) The activities of the National Government.

3) The problems of metropolitan government.

2/ Brooks, Albert James, "A Test of Civic Interests, Understandings, and Attitudes of High School Seniors", (Master's Paper), School of Education, Boston University, 1931, p. 67.

3/ Melbo, Irving R., "Graduating High School Seniors' Information on Contemporary Social, Political, and Economic Problems and Issues," Social Studies, 27:82-86, February, 1936.

4) The relation of industry and government.

5) Taxation and public finance.

> "The schools have tended to teach facts about governmental structure, but neither politics nor political science. Pupils rarely envision government as a social process. Yet in an age of revaluation of democratic theories, of conflicting questions of fascism and communism, of constitutional questionings within our own nation, it is desirable that pupils gain in school deeper insights into the realistic working of politics, the nature and function of a state, the basic elements of a democratic theory, and the broader phases of political theory. The expansion of federal activities in recent years has far outrun the usual textbook account of the national structure. The overlapping agencies of municipal, county, and state governments in the metropolitan areas of the United States are notably weak spots in our political structure. The schools generally have done little to inform pupils in respect to financial questions of a public nature; pertinent information could well be added to existing courses or organized in new topics for instruction."[4]

High school students' political opinions are very often arrived at through misunderstanding and inadequate understanding of the terms used by the campaign writers and speakers.

Howard R. Anderson, at the time he was Professor at Cornell University, tested 240 high school students

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4/ The Social Studies Curriculum, Fourteenth Yearbook, The Department of Superintendence of the National Education Association of the U.S., Washington, D.C. 1936, p. 157.

to study the influence of campaign propaganda in shaping the attitude of pupils. He found that pupils "lacked a reasonable grasp of technical terminology and campaign issues to serve as a reasoned basis for opinions and points of view."[5]

David S. Snedden describes the seven-sided role for which the adult is trained by the school. He expresses concern about the civic side, so sadly neglected and so difficult to learn. He urges upon the school the training of its pupils for constructive participation in civic affairs.[6]

The inquiry made at the direction of the New York Regents has been reported by both Spaulding and Wilson. Spaulding reviewed secondary education in the state of New York. He found that, "pupils leaving school know little of economic issues, less of political problems".[7]

5/ Anderson, Howard R., "Testing Attitude and Understanding", Social Education, Volume 11, Number 3, March, 1938.

6/ Snedden, David S., "Open Roads and Blind Alleys in the Social Studies", School and Society, XLVIII, September, 1938, pp. 323-327.

7/ Spaulding, Francis T., High School and Life, The Regents Inquiry, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1938, Chapter II.

Wilson deplored the fact that pupils in this sampling were so ignorant about their local government.[8]

President Roosevelt's Advisory Committee on Education has reported:

"The lack of interest in, and information regarding civic affairs on the part of a large portion of the people constitutes a real danger to efficient self-government. Rarely does even one-half of the enfranchised voters exercise the right of suffrage. No greater contribution can be made to society by the schools than the inculcation of civic interest and civic information in all who come under their influence. To do less would be to fail the fundamental purpose for which the schools were established."[9]

C.T. Malon, likewise decries the fact that a large number of our citizens do not actively participate in their government. Of the three million new voters who are eligible to cast their first ballots at an election,

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8/ Wilson, Howard E., Education for Citizenship, The Regents Inquiry, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1938, Chapter 11.

9/ Hunt, Erling M., "The Continuing Challenge"--Social Education, 111, October, 1939, p. 450.

not more than 55 percent go to the polls. Malon believes intelligent interest is needed, and he insists that, if the schools developed such interest, young men and women would go to the polls when they become eligible to vote.[10]

Harry W. Porter tested 83 seniors of the Ithaca, New York, high school to determine their feeling about communism, fascism, and democracy. Nearly all of the students were loyal to democracy, but lacked true conceptions of the type of government of their ardent preference.

Specific characteristics of democracy mentioned by the 83 students and the frequency of their appearance are listed below:

"Characteristic	Number of Students
Government of people or representatives	68
Freedom of Speech and Press	57
Religious Freedom	38
Freedom (not specific)	15
Equality	11
Trial by jury in non-partisan courts	11
Freedom of assembly	6
Free public education	6

10/ Malon, C.T., "Democracy in the Making", Social Studies, XXX, December 1939, pp. 355-358.

"Characteristic	Number of Students
Private ownership	5
Respect for individual	5
Minority rights	3
Property protection	4
Tolerance	1" 11

The fact that only 5 students out of 83 mentioned respect for the individual, only 3 noted minority rights, and but a single pupil listed tolerance as an important feature of democracy indicates that high school seniors do not recognize the very heart of democracy.

Only 37 out of 83 seniors tested showed full appreciation of democracy.

It is the contention of this writer that if the students do not know the actual facts of American government, then they are very likely harboring misbeliefs and false notions regarding their government.

"Being a democratic nation our body politic must be taught historical truth and not exploded fallacies and misconceptions."[12]

11/ Porter, Harry W., "How High School Seniors Feel About Communism, Fascism, and Democracy", Social Education, Volume 5, Number 2, February, 1941.

12/ Kelley, Paul F., "Misconceptions About American History Held by High School Seniors", (Master's Paper), Boston University, 1947, p. 17.

That American textbooks have perpetuated exploded fallacies is a proven fact.

Henry Johnson, the celebrated teacher of history teachers, placing much of the blame for error in elementary school textbooks, writes:

> "Of the history that figures in textbook combinations of the social studies by authors without special training in any of the social sciences, not much is to be expected, but some of the errors of fact, misinterpretations, and misapplications with which they promote their pedagogical gospel seem almost inexcusable. Blunders by the score can be gathered from elementary books by reputable historians who would be shocked by palpable blunders in more serious historical works. There are, indeed, scholars who seem to regard accuracy as of minor importance in the writing of textbooks. So long as the general picture is fairly correct, errors in small facts are, they say, of no consequence."13

That American history textbooks are inaccurate in the elementary grades is important to note for purposes of this study, since this is the grade level where the student learns his first concepts of government. And American history courses are the only ones in the primary and intermediate grades which bear upon the subject of government. Moreover, if elementary textbooks are known to be offensively inaccurate, what guarantee is there

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13 / Johnson, Henry, Teaching of History....., Macmillan Company, New York, 1941, pp. 247-248.

that the misinformed youngster ever does rid himself of these original misconceptions? Does the typical high school senior harbor important false beliefs about his government?

> "The subject of government is one of the most difficult to teach satisfactorily on the secondary-school level. ---there are few other subject fields where pupils may so easily obtain a veneer of knowledge without the sound core of comprehension. Achievement in French, mathematics, chemistry, or shorthand may be measured with the reasonable confidence that the pupils test score actually represents his understanding of the subject. This confidence is denied the teacher of government. True, his pupils may glibly recite myriad facts about the framework of political institutions and the machinery by which they function. Yet there is no assurance that underneath they realize what government is, how it really works, and what it means to them." 14

Most high school students are aware of the most important aspect of democratic government, namely, government by the people, or their representatives. But, hardly any high school students know the true meaning of democratic principles.

14/ Irwin, Leonard B., "The Changing Teaching of Government on the Secondary School Level", The Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, February, 1945.

The results of a current happenings test given by Mervin A. Rowe in 1946 indicated in general "a lack of acquaintance and alertness to the main issues of 1945.."[15] Testing 584 high school seniors he found that students did not have great knowledge of current affairs for prospective leaders. Girls had a lower mean than boys. College preparatory studehts had a higher mean than others. The number of social studies courses taken indicated a well-rounded social studies program in most high schools. The highest mean was secured by those students who served in the armed forces. Results indicated that students should get a better coverage of the news.

Benjamin Fine reports that, "history textbooks used in the elementary and high schools of the United States and Canada give a fragmentary, inadequate, and sometimes wholly erroneous impression of the relations between these two great North American democracies."[16]

His conclusions are reached as a result of a comprehensive two-year study conducted by the Canada-United

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15/ Rowe, Mervin Arnold, "A Study to Determine the Extent To Which High School Seniors Are Familiar with Current Happenings", (Master's Paper), Boston University, 1946, p. 53.

16/ Fine, Benjamin, "Education In Review", The New York Times, November 16, 1947, p. E-9.

States Committee on Education, made public by the American Council on Education. Leading educators and historians of both nations served on the Committee. They analyzed the most widely used textbooks to ascertain the extent to which these texts help or hinder understanding.

It was found that the textbooks give misinformation concerning the present status of Canada, preventing students in this country from understanding how Canada, while continuing nominal ties with Britain, has conducted her own affairs, has developed her own policies, and has been important to the United States. The textbooks erred in other ways, too. Some of the books were found to contain national bias and jingoism harmful enough to irritate the sensibilities of the Canadian people.

The Committee felt that most of the existing distortions and misapprehensions could be cleared away by a reshifting of emphasis and more care in the wording. The American Council recommended that the textbooks be revised to give the students of both lands a better understanding of their neighbors.

SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS INVESTIGATIONS

The following statements summarize the conclusions arrived at in the foregoing investigations. Increased popular control of government has made control bafflingly complicated. There is an ever-increasing need for voters to have acquaintance with political issues and leaders. The problems to be decided at the polls are becoming so complicated that the voter needs to give most of his time if he desires to have some knowledge of the facts upon which he is called upon to exercise his judgment.

The voter is shown to be failing to meet this challenge. He lacks interest in civic affairs. He does not turn out to vote on election day. Only one-half of newly-enfranchised voters go to the polls. And what is even worse, the graduates leaving our high schools are ill-equipped to improve the situation.

American textbooks are shown to be perpetuating exploded fallacies. The number of courses dealing with American government offered in our high schools is inadequate to inculcate even the first principles of American democracy. Certain specific areas of study, notably the field of local government, are shown to be sadly neglected. The schools are teaching a veneer of

facts about governmental structure without instilling a sound core of comprehension of democratic principles. High school students fail to understand, or what is even worse, misunderstand many of the words used by political campaigners.

While most students are found to be loyal to democracy, they do not recognize the very heart of the principles of our form of government.

Such is the setting in which this investigator launches his inquiry into the prevalence in which fundamentally important misconceptions are held by high school seniors.

CHAPTER III

CHAPTER III

PLAN AND PROCEDURE OF THE STUDY

The investigator first set about the task of drawing up a long list of probable misconceptions.

At the outset, care was taken to keep all items within the subject field of American government. The items were confined to those which the writer, on the basis of his experience as a student and a teacher in the American government field, believed to be misunderstood rather than totally unknown. Only statements which could reasonably be expected to lie within the comprehension of high school seniors were used. Only basically important items were selected. The wording of all items was kept as simplified as possible in order to avoid handicapping the students to be tested by the language used.

The sources which proved helpful in the preparation of this original list of misconception items were:

1. Wrong answers to classroom tests, which by their wording implied misunderstanding rather than lack of knowledge.
2. Foils found in alternate response items of testing materials published by the

National Council for the Social Studies.[1]

3. Suggestions by several professors and teachers of American government.

A total collection of several hundred possible misconception items were submitted by the writer to his adviser. The original list was drastically revised and shortened in preparation for final validation by experts in the field of American government.

The revised list was next submitted to the Heads of the Departments of Government at Boston University and Brown University; (it was the intention of the writer to subsequently test high school seniors within the metropolitan areas of Boston and Providence). These recognized authorities were asked to criticize, comment upon, add to, or subtract from the original list. The writer received many helpful and valuable suggestions. Finally, three independent experts, (including a second professor on the government staff at Boston University), expressed complete agreement regarding the appropriateness

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1/ Anderson, Howard R. and Lindquist, E. F., "Selected Test Items in American Government", National Council for the Social Studies, Bulletin Number 13, September, 1939.

of fifty misconception items for use in a sample testing survey. These statements were all false. According to the validating authorities, anyone who believed them to be true harbored basically important misconceptions about his government.

Concurrently, the writer prepared a list of twenty-five obviously true statements about American government which were, in turn, approved by his adviser, and finally validated by all of the above-mentioned authorities.

THE TEST [2]

With the fifty validated misconception items and the twenty-five validated true statements, the writer proceeded to construct a modified true-false test.

Both the false and the true items were typed on cards, and the cards were shuffled, to provide a random distribution for the statements in the test.

The use of only twenty-five obviously true items with fifty false items was considered appropriate on the grounds that many of the misconception

2/ See Appendix "B".

items, which were all falsely stated, were expected to be answered true. Thus, a fairly well-balanced test was expected.

The next objective was to insure that no student taking the test would be forced to take a stand either in agreement with, or disagreement with any item about which he was totally ignorant. This consideration was important in that the writer was determined not to contend misconceptions where, in reality, only total ignorance existed. Hence, for every statement in the test there was provided on the answer sheet[3] the opportunity for the student to, "agree with", disagree with", or indicate "uncertain". All "uncertain" answers would be automatically excluded from consideration in the final analysis for misconceptions.

THE QUESTIONNAIRE[4]

A questionnaire preceded the test proper. It was designed to accomplish two things. First, the questionnaire informed the students tested that they

3/ See Appendix "C".
4/ See Appendix "A".

were cooperating in an investigation into the interest and knowledge that high school seniors had about American government, and that their score would not affect their school marks. (This statement was deliberately designed to prevent awareness of the fact that the test was in reality attempting to reveal misconceptions.) Secondly, the questionnaire sought information which would enable subsequent correlation analysis with regard to age, sex, family background, and extent and quality of previous education in American government.

GROUPS TESTED.

In all, 505 high school seniors were tested in eight different towns within the metropolitan areas of Boston, Massachusetts, and Providence, Rhode Island.

TREATMENT OF DATA.

The materials presented include:

1. A table listing all the misconception items in the test, arranged in decreasing order of the percentage of students holding them.

2. A table listing all the true statements used in the test.

3. A table showing the relationship of the students' education in American government to the number of misconceptions held.

4. A table showing the relationship of the students' age to the number of misconceptions held.

5. A table showing the relationship of the parent's occupation to the number of misconceptions held.

6. A table showing whether the boys or the girls hold more misconceptions.

As soon as the test returns came in, an item analysis was made to determine which misconception items were by actual test prevalently held. All papers were then scored on the basis of these prevalently held misconceptions. It was decided that, inasmuch as the students had the chance to indicate uncertainty regarding any item, all items answered wrong by fifty-one percent or more of the total number of students tested would be considered as prevalently held, or bona fide misconceptions.

The correlations attempted in tables 3, 4, 5, and 6, above, were on the basis of only the misconceptions which the test results indicated were bona fide.

The critical ratio technique was employed to show whether or not the differences in means in these tables were statistically significant. The critical ratio equals the difference between two means divided by the standard error of that difference. When this ratio is unity the chances are 68 in 100 that the difference is too great to be the result of sampling fluctuations. Whenever this ratio is 2 the chances are 95 out of a hundred that the difference is too great to be the result of sampling fluctuations. Whenever the ratio is 3 or more it is a practical certainty that the difference is too great to be the result of sampling fluctuations. When this last condition occurs the difference is called statistically significant.[5]

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5 / Wert, James E., Educational Statistics, McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., New York, 1953, p. 145.

CHAPTER IV

CHAPTER IV

REPORT OF THE STUDY

The writer found that of fifty suggested misconceptions used in the test, only sixteen were, in fact, held by the majority of the students tested. This is considered encouraging.

Table I lists all of the misconception items used in the test. The items are listed in decreasing order of the percentage of students wrong. The first sixteen items listed in this table are the false statements believed to be true by over fifty-one percent of all students tested. These, then, in accordance with the outlined procedure of this study, are the sixteen misconceptions assumed to be prevalently held by high school seniors.

It is worth noting, at this point, that the writer found wide differences among the schools sampled with regard to the topical information possessed by the students tested. This would indicate that in a wider sampling a much different group of misconception statements may well have been found to be the bona fide misconceptions prevalently held by high school seniors.

TABLE I

LIST OF MISCONCEPTION ITEMS ARRANGED IN DECREASING ORDER OF THE PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS HOLDING THEM.

1. The Federal government has the power to levy duties on imports and exports.

82% Wrong 4% Uncertain

2. An accused citizen may demand a trial by jury for any alleged offense.

81% Wrong 2% Uncertain

3. The amendments to the constitution have been responsible for the greater part of the growth of constitutional law.

78% Wrong 6% Uncertain

4. The total number of the House of Representatives keeps increasing with the increase of population.

72% Wrong 2% Uncertain

5. The Speaker of the House of Representatives is required by law to be a member of the House.

70% Wrong 15% Uncertain

6. The Vice-President is the legislative leader

of the Senate, similar to the Speaker of the House.

69% Wrong 10% Uncertain

7. In the United States government all the executive powers are granted to one branch of the government, all the legislative powers are granted tc another branch, and all the judicial powers are granted to a third.

65% Wrong 8% Uncertain

8. The spirit of and the capacity for self-government are indelibly ingrained in the American people.

63% Wrong 17% Uncertain

9. Adults of all races can become citizens of the United States.

62% Wrong 5% Uncertain

10. The Secret Service is a branch of the F. B. I.

61% Wrong 7% Uncertain

11. Most of the deliberation on legislation is done on the floor of the House and Senate.

60% Wrong 14% Uncertain

12. Centralization of administration automatically works for efficiency, economy, and the public welfare.

59% Wrong 21% Uncertain

13. The framers of the constitution were the most democratic leaders of their time.

58% Wrong 9% Uncertain

14. Whenever the State or Local government fails to perform a function satisfactorily, the National Government should be requested to perform that function.

56% Wrong 9% Uncertain

15. United States immigration laws are based on the belief that the ideal nationality is made up of all races admitted on an equal basis.

52% Wrong 6% Uncertain

16. Since the Senate failed to convict President Johnson by one vote he was not impeached.

51% Wrong 12% Uncertain

17. Libel means the deliberate destroying of another's character by word of mouth.

50% Wrong 17% Uncertain

18. The government of the District of Columbia is vested in the District itself, independently organized.

49% Wrong 20% Uncertain

19. The United States people spend more for food than they do to run their government.

49% Wrong 20% Uncertain

20. Supreme Court cases are limited almost entirely to those involving questions of the constitutionality of congressional law.

48% Wrong 9% Uncertain

21. The President spends most of his time in the capacity of general manager of the national administration.

47% Wrong 21% Uncertain

22. A writ of habeas corpus entitles a person to an immediate settlement of his case by jury trial.

46% Wrong 11% Uncertain

23. The consent of the Senate is required for removal of officers who initially required senatorial consent for appointment.

44% Wrong 23% Uncertain

24. The popularity of the general property tax as a means of raising state moneys has been increasing rapidly.

43% Wrong 21% Uncertain

25. In this country no one can be arrested without a warrant.

43% Wrong 37% Uncertain

26. Federal courts try all cases in which a foreigner has committed a crime.

41% Wrong 18% Uncertain

27. The presiding officer of the Senate, like the speaker of the House, is always of the majority party.

41% Wrong 10% Uncertain

28. In recent decades the functions of the National government have grown while the functions of the

State government have declined.

40% Wrong 17% Uncertain

29. The President may veto certain items in a bill and allow the rest to become law.

40% Wrong 10% Uncertain

30. The decisions of government arbitration in labor disputes are always compulsory upon labor and employers.

39% Wrong 18% Uncertain

31. The Social Security Act covers the industrial worker, the farmer, and the clerical worker,-all three classes.

39% Wrong 9% Uncertain

32. An alien woman automatically becomes a citizen if she marries an American citizen.

38% Wrong 7% Uncertain

33. The city manager plan insures good government.

37% Wrong 26% Uncertain

34. The President's cabinet is specifically provided for in the Constitution.

37% Wrong 8% Uncertain

35. The President of the United States has the power to declare war.

33% Wrong 2% Uncertain

36. It would take a constitutional amendment to create the office of Secretary of Education.

33% Wrong 17% Uncertain

37. The constitution forbids Congress to increase the number of Supreme Court judges.

33% Wrong 13% Uncertain

38. The legal qualifications for Vice President are not as rigid as those for President.

33% Wrong 7% Uncertain

39. Because of the distribution of votes in the electoral college a President can be elected only if he has a majority of the popular vote.

32% Wrong 6% Uncertain

40. The powers exercised by American cities and towns are not controlled by the state.

31% Wrong 6% Uncertain

41. Only the Federal government has the right to tax inheritances.

30% Wrong 17% Uncertain

42. Our present United States Constitution is the only one we ever had.

29% Wrong 4% Uncertain

43. The qualifications of the voters in National elections are determined by the National government.

28% Wrong 11% Uncertain

44. A good example of a tax that varies according to a person's ability to pay is the sales tax.

27% Wrong 6% Uncertain

45. The electoral college has never failed to elect a President.

27% Wrong 19% Uncertain

46. As a rule, the greater the number of elected officials, the more efficient the government is.

23% Wrong 7% Uncertain

47. Successful managers of big business would guarantee safe guidance for the management of government.

21% Wrong 22% Uncertain

48. City zoning means planning streets and alleys wide enough for traffic.

18% Wrong 3% Uncertain

49. The terms of the United States Senator and Representative are the same.

14% Wrong 1% Uncertain

50. There is no important distinction between ambassadors and consuls.

13% Wrong 12% Uncertain

TABLE II

Table II lists the twenty-five obviously true statements used in the test to intersperse the fifty misconception statements, and give the appearance of a true-false achievement test. Large numbers of students failed to recognize many of these items as true, contrary to the anticipation of the writer and the experts who validated the test. It should be remembered that these items were deliberately chosen because it was believed that most high school seniors would immediately recognize them to be true statements about their government. The writer believes that he has accidentally added to the abundant proof of the high school senior's ignorance of his government as shown by previous investigators.

TABLE II

LIST OF TRUE STATEMENTS ARRANGED IN DECREASING ORDER OF PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS RIGHT.

1. The three basic branches of the United States Government are: executive, legislative, judicial.

99% Right 0% Uncertain

2. The presiding officer of the House of Representatives is called the Speaker of the House.

97% Right 1% Uncertain

3. Upon the death of the President, the Vice President becomes President.

96% Right 1% Uncertain

4. The right of the President to refuse to sign legislation is called the veto.

95% Right 1% Uncertain

5. Most states require at least 21 years of age among the qualifications for voting.

95% Right 1% Uncertain

6. Customs duties are levied upon goods brought into this country.

93% Right 4% Uncertain

7. In the United States an accused person is considered innocent until proven guilty.

93% Right 1% Uncertain

8. The Governor is the highest ranking executive officer of the state.

92% Right 1% Uncertain

9. The United States Government relies heavily for its revenue upon the income tax.

89% Right 3% Uncertain

10. The legislative branch of the government is responsible for making laws.

89% Right 2% Uncertain

11. There are two United States Senators from each state.

88% Right 2% Uncertain

12. The president has the power to grant pardons to Federal prisoners.

87% Right 2% Uncertain

13. State laws list the grounds for divorce.

86% Right 5% Uncertain

14. The Taft-Hartley Law regulates labor-management relations.

85% Right 7% Uncertain

15. A passport officially establishes the identity of a person abroad.

85% Right 3% Uncertain

16. The national convention of a political party nominates that party's candidates for the presidency and vice-presidency.

83% Right 6% Uncertain

17. A political machine is the working organization of a political party.

79% Right 5% Uncertain

18. Lobbying enables special interests to influence legislation.

76% Right 10% Uncertain

19. Congressmen are elected by popular vote.

72% Right 6% Uncertain

20. Party patronage is a practice used by successful party leaders to fill public offices after a victorious election.

70% Right 13% Uncertain

21. The chief source of revenue for local government is the general property tax.

56% Right 18% Uncertain

22. Amendments to the United States Constitution specifically prohibit as a

basis for limiting the privilege to vote: sex, race, color, or previous conditions of servitude.

56% Right 7% Uncertain

23. The Attorney General is the chief legal adviser to the President of the United States.

48% Right 18% Uncertain

24. The fourteenth amendment says that a state may not deprive a person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law.

41% Right 22% Uncertain

25. Poll taxes are head taxes usually levied on every adult male.

36% Right 9% Uncertain

TABLE III

Table III is the Grade and Course table. The purpose is to correlate the prevalency of misceptions with the extent and quality of the students' previous education in American government. A mean score was determined for the number of misconceptions held by one hundred students who had only two or less courses bearing on American government and below average grades. This mean score was compared with the mean for one hundred students who had three or more courses and above average grades. As indicated in the table, the students who had fewer courses and lower grades held a greater number of misconceptions than did more adequately instructed students. Of the various correlations attempted in this study, this is at once the most pronounced and the most reassuring.

TABLE III

GRADE AND COURSE TABLE

NUMBER OF PREVALENT MISCONCEPTIONS HELD	100 LOWEST GRADES AND LEAST COURSES	100 HIGHEST GRADES AND MOST COURSES
1	0	0
2	0	0
3	0	0
4	1	0
5	3	2
6	1	8
7	6	8
8	4	8
9	7	17
10	17	11
11	11	12
12	12	11
13	14	9
14	12	8
15	10	5
16	2	1
TOTAL STUDENTS	100	100
MEAN NUMBER OF MISCONCEPTIONS HELD	11.3	8.9

CRITICAL RATIO = 6.3

TABLE IV

Table IV is the Age Table, wherein it is shown that the one hundred oldest students tested harbor fewer misunderstandings about their government than do the one hundred youngest students surveyed. This finding is in line with previous inquiries which have shown that the student's fund of information about politics and government is contributed to heavily by influences outside the school.

TABLE IV

AGE TABLE

NUMBER OF PREVALENT MISCONCEPTIONS HELD	100 YOUNGEST STUDENTS	100 OLDEST STUDENTS
1	0	0
2	0	1
3	1	1
4	0	2
5	2	3
6	1	5
7	3	5
8	4	8
9	4	11
10	11	9
11	13	15
12	16	18
13	15	8
14	15	9
15	8	3
16	7	2
TOTAL STUDENTS	100	100
MEAN NUMBER OF MISCONCEPTIONS HELD	11.9	10.3

CRITICAL RATIO = 3

TABLE V

Table V correlates the number of misconceptions held with the influence in the home of the father's occupation. Here it is shown that there is a difference, though not wide, between the one hundred students whose fathers are engaged in skilled trades or professional pursuits, and the one hundred students whose fathers work in the unskilled trades. The students with the skilled or professional parents enjoy the advantage of being less susceptible to misbeliefs about their government. It is encouraging that the difference between the mean scores of these two groups is not great. The findings in this table, when compared to the findings in table III, indicate that if the student is provided with adequate instruction concerning his government, he will, for the most part, absorb it well regardless of his parents ability or station in life.

TABLE V

PARENT'S OCCUPATION TABLE

NUMBER OF PREVALENT MISCONCEPTIONS HELD	100 LOWEST SKILLED PARENT'S OCCUPATION	100 HIGHEST SKILLED PARENT'S OCCUPATION
1	0	0
2	0	1
3	0	1
4	0	0
5	2	2
6	2	4
7	2	5
8	3	12
9	10	11
10	15	15
11	14	16
12	22	8
13	10	9
14	10	10
15	5	5
16	5	1
TOTAL STUDENTS	100	100
MEAN NUMBER OF MISCONCEPTIONS HELD	11.4	10.4

CRITICAL RATIO = 8.7

TABLE VI

Table VI portrays the last correlation attempted in this study--the influence of sex upon the number of misconceptions held by the students. The correlation is almost negligible, with the boys holding a very slight advantage over the girls tested in this survey.

TABLE VI

SEX TABLE

NUMBER OF PREVALENT MISCONCEPTIONS HELD	BOYS	GIRLS
1	0	0
2	1	0
3	2	0
4	2	2
5	3	4
6	9	8
7	13	9
8	26	10
9	28	19
10	38	29
11	35	38
12	36	39
13	34	28
14	29	20
15	18	13
16	4	8
TOTAL STUDENTS	278	227
MEAN NUMBER OF MISCONCEPTIONS HELD	10.9	11.1

CRITICAL RATIO = .87

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CHAPTER V

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The attention of the reader is drawn to the fact that sixteen misconceptions were found to be prevalently held by 505 students. This is not a very wide validation sampling when we consider that Dr. Kinsey's great work in the field of misconceptions in sex, currently being revealed to the public, is being criticized in some quarters because of the small sampling of only 6,800 case histories! Also, the seniors tested were from only eight different high schools, all within the metropolitan areas of Boston and Providence. The findings showed that even within this narrow area important differences exist in the knowledge which students possess in the schools sampled. It is believed safe to assume that a wider sampling would indicate basic changes in the percentages of answers right, wrong, and uncertain for each item.

Again, the total misconception items used in the test were drawn up by one investigator, and arbitrarily validated by three experts in American

government. There is no telling whether or not the majority of all experts in this field would approve of all the misconception items used.

It is important to remember that the fifty-one percent wrong basis for judging the prevalently held misconceptions, however justified, is open to criticism--particularly on the grounds of the limitations of the inquiry with respect to both the areas involved and the number of students tested.

If, for example, seventy-five percent wrong had been used as a criterion for bona fide misconceptions, then the results of the test would have revealed only three misconceptions to be held prevalently.

The only logical conclusion that can be drawn is that, in spite of the dim picture painted by previous investigators, there does not appear to be an alarmingly large number of fundamentally important misconceptions about American government held by high school seniors.

Little mean difference was found between total boys and total girls tested in their susceptibility to misconceptions about their government. The boys held a very slight advantage. The mean difference was .2. The critical ratio was .87, indicating that the difference in means was very likely due to fluctuations in the test

sampling.[1]

The greatest mean difference noted was between the one hundred students having had the most courses, and above average grades, compared to the one hundred students who had the least instruction in the American government field, and below average grades. The mean difference was 2.4. The critical ratio was 6.3, indicating that the difference between the means was statistically significant. This showed the telling effect of adequate instruction.

The next most important difference observed was between the one hundred oldest students tested compared to the one hundred youngest students. The mean difference was 1.6. The critical ratio was 3, indicating statistical significance. It was clear that the older student had a definite advantage.

Another important difference was noted between the one hundred students whose fathers were engaged in skilled trades or the professions compared to the one hundred students whose fathers worked in unskilled occupations. The mean difference was 1. The critical ratio was 2.7, indicating an approximate statistical significance. Here the writer found that where the parent is professional or skilled , the less susceptible is the student to misunderstanding the functions of his government.

1/ See above, p. 27.

What, then, is the value of the results of this study?

The writer believes that it is useful for teachers and textbook writers to be alerted concerning the sixteen misconceptions which the results of this investigation indicate are prevalently held by high school seniors. Also, the path is now open for further inquiry.

Teachers of American government can use the misconceptions in Table I as a pre-test to be given to their students to determine which of the false ideas are, in fact, held by their particular classes, and then set about the task of dispelling them. This will stimulate the teacher to be on the lookout for other possible misconceptions which his classes might be holding. In fact, it is conceivable that some teachers, themselves, might use this study profitably by examining into the accuracy of their own information on the subject.

Likewise, the writers of texts in American government, especially in the elementary grades, might take warning that here are some indications of fundamentally important misconceptions which are pre-

valently held by high school seniors. Are their writings responsible for any of this false knowledge or other possible misbeliefs? Are they the kind of textbook writers revealed by Henry Johnson, Benjamin Fine, and other previous investigators in this field, to be perpetuating exploded fallacies?

Finally, it is hoped that new investigators will penetrate further into this highly important, but relatively unexplored, field of study.

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PART I

QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire is part of an investigation into the interest and knowledge that high school seniors have in American government. Your score will not affect your mark in this course. It is hoped that you will find the test both interesting and easy. Please fill in the following blanks.

_____ _____
(name) (school)

_____ _____
(age - years and months) (sex)

Father's occupation_____

Check the courses you have had in which you have studied about American government (including any courses you are presently taking). Give the grade you made in each course as accurately as you can recall.

Course	Completed	Now taking	Grade Rec'd
Civics	( )	( )	( )
American History	( )	( )	( )
Government	( )	( )	( )
Problems of Democracy	( )	( )	( )
Other courses	( )	( )	( )
_____	( )	( )	( )
_____	( )	( )	( )

Do you think more American government should be taught in the high schools?

PART II

TEST

NOTE-

Please answer the test items on the answer sheet provided. Indicate your answer by checking the appropriate column whether you agree with, disagree with, or are uncertain about the numbered statements. Thank you for your cooperation.

1. Customs duties are levied upon goods brought into this country.

2. Whenever the State or Local government fails to perform a function satisfactorily, the National government should be requested to perform that function.

3. The Attorney General is thechief legal adviser to the President of the United States.

4. The president has the power to grant pardons to Federal prisoners.

5. The terms of the United States Senator and Representative are the same.

6. The consent of the Senate is required for removal of officers who initially required senatorial consent for appointment.

7. A passport officially establishes the identity of a person abroad.

8. The legislative branch of the government is responsible for making laws.

9. There is no important distinction between ambassadors and consuls.

10. Centralization of administration automatically works for efficiency, economy, and the public welfare.

11. The Governor is the highest ranking executive officer of the state.

12. Most states require at least 21 years of age among the qualifications for voting.

13. Successful managers of big business would guarantee safe guidancefor the management of government.

PART II
TEST

14. There are two United States Senators from each state.

15. The Taft-Hartley Law regulates labor-management relations.

16. The spirit of and the capacity for self-government are indelibly ingrained in the American people.

17. Congressmen are elected by popular vote.

18. Upon the death of the President, the Vice President becomes President.

19. Our present United States Constitution is the only one we ever had.

20. The President spends most of his time in the capacity of general manager of the national administration.

21. The presiding officer of the House of Representatives is called the Speaker of the House.

22. The right of the President to refuse to sign legislation is called the veto.

23. The Vice President is the legislative leader of the Senate, similar to the Speaker of the House.

24. Most of the deliberation on legislation is done on the floor of the House and Senate.

25. The qualifications of the voters in National elections are determined by the National government.

26. The decisions of government arbitration in labor disputes are always compulsory upon labor and employers.

27. The city manager plan insures good government.

28. A political machine is the working organization of a political party.

29. A good example of a tax that varies according to a person's ability to pay is the sales tax.

30. The Social Security Act covers the industrial work, the farmer, and the clerical worker--all three classes.

APPENDIX "B"

PART II
TEST

31. The fourteenth amendment says that a state may not deprive a person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law.

32. Supreme Court cases are limited almost entirely to those involving questions of the constitutionality of congressional law.

33. The constitution forbids Congress to increase the number of Supreme Court judges.

34. State laws list the grounds for divorce.

35. The powers exercised by American cities and towns are not controlled by the state.

36. Since the Senate failed to convict President Johnson by one vote he was not impeached.

37. United States immigration laws are based on the belief that the ideal nationality is made up of all races admitted on an equal basis.

38. The Secret Service is a branch of the F.B.I.

39. Lobbying enables special interests to influence legislation.

40. In recent decades the functions of the National government have grown while the functions of the State government have declined.

41. The amendments to the constitution have been responsible for the greater part of the growth of constitutional law.

42. Party patronage is a practice used by successful party leaders to fill public offices after a victorious election.

43. Poll taxes are head taxes usually levied on every adult male.

44. As a rule, the greater the number of elected officials, the more efficient the government is.

45. An accused citizen may demand a trial by jury for any alleged offense.

46. The popularity of the general property tax as a means of

raising state moneys has been increasing rapidly.

47. The President of the United States has the power to declare war.

48. Amendments to the United States Constitution specifically prohibit as a basis for limiting the privilege to vote: sex, race, color, or previous conditions of servitude.

49. The national convention of a political party nominates that party's candidates for the presidency and vice presidency.

50. City zoning means planning streets and alleys wide enough for traffic.

51. Because of the distribution of votes in the electoral college a President can be elected only if he has a majority of the popular vote.

52. The chief source of revenue for local government is the general property tax.

53. The framers of the constitution were the most democratic leaders of their time.

54. An alien woman automatically becomes a citizen if she marries an American citizen.

55. A writ of habeas corpus entitles a person to an immediate settlement of his case by jury trial.

56. Adults of all races can become citizens of the United States.

57. Libel means the deliberate destroying of another's character by word of mouth.

58. In the United States an accused person is considered innocent until proven guilty.

59. The President may veto certain items in a bill and allow the rest to become law.

60. The Federal government has the power to levy duties on imports and exports.

61. Only the Federal government has the right to tax inheritances.

62. The government of the District of Columbia is vested in the District itself, independently organized.

63. It would take a constitutional amendment to create the office of Secretary of Education.

64. The electoral college has never failed to elect a President.

65. The three basic branches of the United States Government are: executive, legislative, judicial.

66. The legal qualifications for Vice President are not as rigid as those for President.

67. The President's cabinet is specifically provided for in the Constitution.

68. The United States people spend more for food than they do to run their government.

69. Federal courts try all cases in which a foreigner has committed a crime.

70. The presiding officer of the Senate, like the speaker of the House, is always of the majority party.

71. In the United States government all the executive powers are granted to one branch of the government, all the legislative powers are granted to another branch, and all the judicial powers are granted to a third.

72. The Speaker of the House of Representatives is required by law to be a member of the House.

73. In this country no one can be arrested without a warrant.

74. The total number of the House of Representatives keeps increasing with the increase of population.

75. The United States Government relies heavily for its revenue upon the income tax.

PART III

ANSWER SHEET

Test Item	Agree	Disag	Uncert	Test Item	Agree	Disag	Uncert
1.	(X)	( )	( )	41.	( )	(X)	( )
2.	( )	(X)	( )	42.	(X)	( )	( )
3.	(X)	( )	( )	43.	(X)	( )	( )
4.	(X)	( )	( )	44.	( )	(X)	( )
5.	( )	(X)	( )	45.	( )	(X)	( )
6.	( )	(X)	( )	46.	( )	(X)	( )
7.	(X)	( )	( )	47.	( )	(X)	( )
8.	(X)	( )	( )	48.	(X)	( )	( )
9.	( )	(X)	( )	49.	(X)	( )	( )
10.	( )	(X)	( )	50.	( )	(X)	( )
11.	(X)	( )	( )	51.	( )	(X)	( )
12.	(X)	( )	( )	52.	(X)	( )	( )
13.	( )	(X)	( )	53.	( )	(X)	( )
14.	(X)	( )	( )	54.	( )	(X)	( )
15.	(X)	( )	( )	55.	( )	(X)	( )
16.	( )	(X)	( )	56.	( )	(X)	( )
17.	(X)	( )	( )	57.	( )	(X)	( )
18.	(X)	( )	( )	58.	(X)	( )	( )
19.	( )	(X)	( )	59.	( )	(X)	( )
20.	( )	(X)	( )	60.	( )	(X)	( )
21.	(X)	( )	( )	61.	( )	(X)	( )
22.	(X)	( )	( )	62.	( )	(X)	( )
23.	( )	(X)	( )	63.	( )	(X)	( )
24.	( )	(X)	( )	64.	( )	(X)	( )
25.	( )	(X)	( )	65.	(X)	( )	( )
26.	( )	(X)	( )	66.	( )	(X)	( )
27.	( )	(X)	( )	67.	( )	(X)	( )
28.	(X)	( )	( )	68.	( )	(X)	( )
29.	( )	(X)	( )	69.	( )	(X)	( )
30.	( )	(X)	( )	70.	( )	(X)	( )
31.	(X)	( )	( )	71.	( )	(X)	( )
32.	( )	(X)	( )	72.	( )	(X)	( )
33.	( )	(X)	( )	73.	( )	(X)	( )
34.	(X)	( )	( )	74.	( )	(X)	( )
35.	( )	(X)	( )	75.	(X)	( )	( )
36.	( )	(X)	( )				
37.	( )	(X)	( )				
38.	( )	(X)	( )				
39.	(X)	( )	( )				
40.	( )	(X)	( )				

APPENDIX "C"

BOSTON UNIVERSITY
1 1719 02544 3682